

CHRISTIAN FAITH NOT INCONSISTENT

WITH

THE PURSUITS OF SCIENCE.

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A

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PREACHED AT THE

Consecration

OF

QUEEN'S COLLEGE CHAPEL, BIRMINGHAM,

ON FRIDAY, NOV. 15, 1844.

BY

HENRY, LORD BISHOP OF WORCESTER.

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TO
THE PRINCIPAL,
THE VICE-PRINCIPAL,
AND THE COUNCIL
OF
QUEEN'S COLLEGE, BIRMINGHAM,

This Discourse,

PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,

IS RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,

BY

THEIR FAITHFUL SERVANT,

H. WORCESTER.

HARTLEBURY CASTLE,
NOV. 22, 1844.



SERMON,

&c.

ST. MATTHEW xi. 25.

“At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.”

THERE are few errors which have been productive of more evil consequences to the interests of genuine Christianity, than an injudicious mode of interpreting the holy Scriptures according to the letter rather than the spirit of them. Had due attention been always paid to the distinction between plain and figurative expressions, between such as bear a temporary and partial application to the times in which they were written, and those which may be considered as addressed to the whole Christian world in all ages, the most abundant streams of error might have been stopped at their

source, and the Church of Christ have been maintained, according to the intention of its Divine Founder, in the unity of the Spirit, and the bond of peace. It is to us a matter of reasonable exultation that the reformers of our Church availed themselves of that light, which a more free and rational mode of interpretation had thrown upon the sacred volume, to redeem its doctrines from all the monstrous absurdities of papal superstition. Unfortunately, however, the same cause of error still remains, and has sometimes led to the belief and propagation of opinions, almost equally repugnant to the sense of fair interpretation. Among these may be reckoned the inference, which has been sometimes drawn from the words of my text, and others of like import which occasionally occur in the holy Scriptures, that the cultivation of our intellectual faculties is inconsistent with much proficiency in religion; and that what was said of the rich man may with equal truth be predicated of the learned man, "that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for him to enter the kingdom of heaven." To examine the grounds of a doctrine so discouraging to the progress of the human intellect, would under any circumstances be no uninteresting object of inquiry; but it becomes, perhaps, more peculiarly appropriate on an occasion like the present, when, deeply impressed with the importance of combining religious educa-

tion with sound learning, we have been engaged in consecrating to the service of God this portion of a building, erected principally for the advancement of medical science. Such an investigation is indeed the more necessary, as, upon the admission, which has sometimes been incautiously made by the professed friends of revealed religion, that the cultivation of the understanding, and the pursuits of human learning, are often inconsistent with the progress of religion, the adversaries of our faith have grounded some of their most plausible objections to revelation. They readily concede to the enthusiast, that the decline of religion generally accompanies the advancement of knowledge; but they draw a very different conclusion, and infer from thence that the Christian faith is founded, not upon the solid basis of rational inquiry, but upon the fears of a credulous superstition, or the visions of a heated imagination. Hence has Christianity been sometimes represented, particularly in these latter times, as a system of religion well calculated, indeed, to maintain in their due order the various elements of society in times of barbarous ignorance, but such as must yield to the superior lights and acquirements of a more enlightened period, and would finally cease to influence the faith and practice of mankind, whenever the powers of the human mind shall have been carried to their utmost extent: hence has the honourable term of philosopher

become in a neighbouring nation almost synonymous with that of free-thinker, and hence have many pious and sincere Christians looked with suspicion upon those intellectual acquirements which they have been taught to consider as frequently, if not necessarily, accompanied by scepticism at least, if not infidelity. That the cultivation of those intellectual powers, which are the gift of God to man, and the grand distinction which He has placed between man and brute, should be inconsistent with his more precious gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, might indeed, if admitted, be justly considered as no weak argument against the Divine origin of Christianity; since it could not readily be believed that an omnipotent and benevolent Being had endued his creatures with an insatiable thirst after knowledge only as a lure to their own destruction, and had bestowed upon them faculties, capable indeed, by assiduous cultivation, of almost indefinite improvement, but such as diminish the empire of faith, while they extend that of knowledge.

The propagation of the Gospel was, indeed, in the first instance entrusted to the low and illiterate, for the Lord of heaven and earth thought proper, in the infancy of Christianity, to "hide its mysteries from the wise and prudent, and to reveal them unto babes;" but for such a dispensation very obvious causes may be assigned, without placing Reason

and Revelation in unnatural opposition to each other. Had Christianity been first indebted for its success to the wise and prudent, there might have been some pretence for considering it as a cunningly devised fable, invented by the politician for the maintenance of his authority, or by the religious impostor, as the foundation of his influence; but when it was seen that a few illiterate and obscure individuals succeeded in establishing the religion of Jesus, notwithstanding the prejudices of long-established superstitions, and the pride of a false philosophy, the hand of Omnipotence became distinctly visible in its rapid success, and mankind were induced to admit, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes." No sooner, however, had Christianity taken deep root, than it pleased the Almighty to withdraw those props and supports, which its mature age no longer required. The power of God ceased to manifest itself in those miraculous testimonies, to which the Apostles had been permitted to refer; and mankind were thenceforth left, aided, we trust, by the Holy Spirit, to the exertion of their own industry and their own faculties, in the discovery of religious, as of all other truths. Since then our intellectual faculties are thus the means appointed of God, by which we may arrive at the knowledge of truth, it is reasonable to conclude, that the more these are improved, the

clearer views we shall have of those Divine dispensations, which we believe to be founded upon his Word; and that the cause of Christianity has in fact been most materially aided by the advancement of knowledge, and that so far from depending for its success on the ignorance of the human mind, it will be found in its most pure and perfect state during the most enlightened periods, it will be my object to prove in the remaining part of this discourse.

It would, however, be a superfluous waste of time, if we were to advert at any length to the more obvious modes in which the interests of religion have been promoted by the advancement of knowledge. Whether we consider the great truths of natural religion, with which those of revelation are so closely connected, and which have of late years been so beautifully illustrated by the investigations of natural philosophy, or the confirmation which the evidences of Christianity derive from the researches of the antiquary and the historian, it will not be denied that no inconsiderable light has been thrown upon Divine truth by the torch of human science. Without stopping, therefore, to maintain what perhaps may justly be considered undisputed points, it may be more profitable for us to proceed to the consideration of those departments of science, which have been sometimes con-

sidered as involving difficulties, and exhibiting phenomena the most inconsistent with the Mosaic or Christian dispensation.

Thus the science of astronomy, however calculated by the magnificent view which it exhibits of the power and wisdom of God to excite in our minds sentiments the most favourable to religion, has from this very circumstance been sometimes enlisted on the side of scepticism. Appalled by the infinite extent of that universe which the discoveries of modern times have opened to our view, and sensibly struck with the comparative minuteness of the world which we inhabit, the Christian philosopher is led to exclaim, "Lord, what is man that thou so regardest him? or the son of man that thou visitest him?" The infidel, on the other hand, while he contemplates the endless succession of new worlds and new systems, which modern discoveries have brought within the compass of his view, and draws the very reasonable inference, that probably myriads of other worlds occupy the regions of infinite space that are placed beyond it, is led to question the Gospel history of man's redemption, not because he can allege any defect in the positive evidence upon which it is founded, but because he cannot believe that we, the puny occupiers of a bare atom in the great field of creation, should have been objects of such peculiar interest to the great God of this almost infinite universe. In answer to

such an objection it has been, in the first place, justly observed, that we have no right to assume that the efficacy of Christ's death must necessarily have been confined to the inhabitants of this earth. The interest which *we* have in it is all which it was important for us to know, but there is nothing unphilosophical or unscriptural in conceiving it possible, that other worlds and other orders of beings may have likewise participated in the benefits to be derived from that great sacrifice. We do not, indeed, presume to entertain decided opinions upon a point removed so far above the reach of our comprehension; but where the objection taken is founded upon the gratuitous assumption that the whole of God's purpose in ordaining the sacrifice of Christ has been revealed to us, it is surely reasonable to oppose a hypothesis, which, while it solves the difficulty, is at least as capable of proof.

But the most satisfactory answer to the objection in question, will be found in a due consideration of the grounds on which it rests. Our conclusions must be false, if in reasoning on the dispensations of God we allow our minds to be swayed by notions derived from the imperfect faculties of man. To us, who can with difficulty command our attention to more than one thing at the same time, it may doubtless appear extraordinary that the great God of the universe, while engaged in the magnificent

task of maintaining the harmony of the spheres, should be capable of directing his attention to the concerns of this speck in the creation, as if it were the object of his exclusive and undivided care : but what right have we to confine the powers of the Almighty within those limits, which the imperfection of our nature has prescribed to us? and shall we not be forming far more adequate ideas of his incomprehensible character, if we believe (to use the words of a living eloquent writer,) “that while He is capable of embracing in one point of view the whole amplitude of nature to the very outermost of her boundaries, He is not on this account the less able to observe, govern, and direct the minutest portion of his creation? Magnitude, indeed, does not overpower Him; but minuteness cannot escape Him, and variety cannot bewilder Him. Hence, at the very time that the mind of the Deity is abroad over the whole vastness of creation, there is not one particle of matter, there is not a single world in the expanse which teems with them, that his eye does not discern as constantly, and his hand does not guide as unerringly, and his Spirit does not watch and care for as vigilantly, as if it formed the exclusive object of his attention.” To him, then, who has formed adequate notions of the Deity, the minuteness of this world, when compared with the rest of creation, will no longer be considered as a reason why it should not have been

made an object of his redeeming care; why He should not have put forth every expedient to reclaim those children who had wandered from Him, and even lay upon his Son the burden of their redemption, rather than suffer even one strayed and solitary world out of the myriads which do Him homage to perish in the guilt of its rebellion.

But the science which has afforded the most plausible arguments to the sceptic, is that which investigates the different strata of which the earth is composed. To the humble and pious Christian, who believes implicitly in the Mosaic dispensation, have been frequently opposed those appearances of a greater antiquity, which are supposed to be indicated by the position of the earth's strata and the fossil remains which they contain. It would be both presumptuous and unbecoming were we from this place to enter at any length into the consideration of this subject; but as this is an argument which has frequently been brought forward against the authenticity of the books of Moses, and been considered as interposing an insuperable barrier between faith and science, it may not be improper here to remark, that it has been completely refuted by the discoveries which in these latter years have been made in this department of science. It seems now to be admitted, that though there are proofs derived from an examination of the earth's strata, and the fossil remains which they

contain, of numerous changes and revolutions in the external covering of our globe, and though some of these may appear to have taken place at a period antecedent to the dates assigned to the books of Moses, yet we are justified in believing, upon the authority of the ablest writer¹ upon the subject which the present age can boast, and one belonging to a class of philosophers and a nation not in general disposed to favour the cause of Christianity, that the last and final settlement of the globe, according to its present form, could not have been very ancient. When we recollect the triumphant tone in which appeals have been heretofore made against the books of Moses to the result of geological inquiries, it is matter of just exultation to the advocates of revealed religion, when they find the most distinguished of modern geologists admitting (to use his own words) that “if there is any circumstance thoroughly established in geology, it is that the crust of our globe has been subjected to a great and sudden revolution, the epoch of which cannot be carried much farther back than five or six thousand years.” What or if any revolutions have taken place in the earth’s surface *previous* to this seems to be a question, which, however interesting to the philosophical inquirer, does not affect the veracity of the Mosaic history. According to that history

¹ Cuvier.

we are bound indeed to admit that only one general destruction or revolution of the globe has taken place since the period of that creation which Moses records, and of which Adam and Eve were the first inhabitants; and we have seen that the certainty of that event would have appeared from the discoveries of geology, if it had not been declared by the sacred historian: but we are not called upon to deny the possible existence of former worlds, from the wreck of which our globe may have been organized, and the ruins of which may now be furnishing matter for our curiosity.

Before we quit this part of our subject it may not be improper to remark, that while nothing can be alleged from the modern discoveries in geology inconsistent with the Mosaic history, they afford the most conclusive evidence against all systems of chance or necessity. If, indeed, the materials of which our globe is composed, contain within them the ruins of former worlds, such worlds must originally have been called into existence, and have ceased to exist, at the fiat of an Almighty Creator; for had their existence been necessary and independent, the same necessity would have prevented their destruction. It is well known, that rather than admit the existence of one great first Cause, sceptical philosophers have had recourse to the extravagant theory of a perpetual generation. Such a theory is, however, completely inconsistent with

the modern discoveries in geology ; since these afford not only the strongest evidence from natural appearances that this world had a beginning, but likewise give us every reason to believe, that previous to its existence another order of things and another race of beings had also been called into existence, and had ceased to exist, while the theory of a perpetual generation necessarily supposes all things to have continued from eternity as they are now.

In taking a view of those departments of science which have been supposed to encourage a sceptical turn of mind, it is impossible wholly to overlook, upon an occasion like the present, the attempts which have been sometimes made, particularly by medical writers, to found arguments against the immateriality of the soul, and consequently against the very first principles of religion, upon the physiology of the human frame. That our observations may not be carried to too great a length, we will content ourselves with remarking upon this point, that the difficulties in question seem to owe their birth solely to our imperfect knowledge upon such subjects. We can, indeed, to a certain extent trace the manner in which the soul and body mutually affect each other. Beyond, all is darkness and conjecture, unless we are willing to repose with the humility, which true philosophy would inculcate, upon the sure word of God. So it may be difficult

and perhaps impossible for us in our present stage of being to form any notion of the manner in which immaterial substances can continue to exist in a state of separation from matter : but if there be a truth which forces itself upon our conviction with greater power of evidence than another, it is that at least one such immaterial substance does exist, in that great incomprehensible Being, “who filleth the heavens and the earth with his presence.” When, therefore, this great truth is thus capable of the most certain demonstration from every object of our senses, and every deduction of our reason, why should it be thought impossible or improbable that other immaterial substances should exist by his permission to do Him homage, and

“ day without night
Circle his throne rejoicing ? ”

We are, indeed, unable to conceive in what manner this mode of existence can be bestowed upon us ; but we are alike incapable of conceiving in what manner the Almighty Spirit can pervade all space, can direct the motion of the spheres, and at the same time extend his providential care over every sparrow that falleth to the ground. Let not, then, that ignorance which we do not allow to affect our faith in the one case be permitted to affect it in the other. That we are beings endued with immortal souls, is a truth which, though it must always depend for its principal evidence upon the authority

of Scripture, derives also no slight confirmation from the almost universal assent of mankind, from the partial distribution of good and evil in this world, and from those longings after immortality which we may reasonably conclude would not have been implanted by a benevolent God on the mind of man, if he had been like the beasts that perish. Let us, then, be content to hold this great truth upon the authority of the book of nature as well as the book of revelation, and in common with the great and good in every age of the world, without fearing that any inferences can be drawn against it from the researches of minute philosophers, whose attention seems to have been engrossed by the contemplation of matter till they have lost almost all conception of mind.

We have thus attempted to prove that there is no ground for the insinuation which is so frequently thrown out against Christianity, that it is inconsistent with a state of advanced knowledge. We have seen that the difficulties which different departments of science are supposed to involve, are founded either upon our ignorance of the Divine nature, or have been removed by more recent discoveries. May we not, then, reasonably hope that such will continue to be the case, and that the farther we shall be enabled to carry the investigations of science, the clearer views shall we obtain of the Divine government, and the greater confirmation

will be afforded to our faith in the main truths of the Gospel? If, however, in the course of literary or scientific inquiries, difficulties should occur which we are unable to reconcile with the word of God, let us always bear in mind the strong probability that such difficulties proceed only from our imperfect knowledge, and may possibly be hereafter removed by a farther advance in that very science which at present appears to suggest them. The book of nature and the book of revelation both proceed from the same great Author; they cannot, therefore, be really inconsistent with each other, however the imperfection of our faculties may prevent our being able to perceive in every case their exact coincidence. Such a beautiful manifestation of harmony in all the works of God may be one of our principal enjoyments in a higher state of existence; but in the mean time we may reasonably expect that the more our intellectual faculties are improved, and the greater the advances which we are permitted to make in the knowledge of God's natural works, the more intimate conviction shall we obtain of his revealed truth, and the less shall we be perplexed with apparent difficulties, whose source in most cases will be found in our ignorance and not in our knowledge. Let us first pray, that "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness would shine in our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of God in the person of

Jesus Christ," and we may then cultivate to their utmost extent our intellectual faculties, or carry our researches into every department of science, without any fear that we shall thereby endanger the grounds of our faith: for he who has thus "added to his faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge," will learn to confine his inquiries within those limits which seem prescribed to him by his own imperfect nature, nor presume to pronounce dogmatically upon points which may perhaps have been purposely placed above his comprehension; nor will the religious philosopher who observes the ways of God at such an humble and respectful distance, be on this account disposed to call their reality in question, any more than he would doubt the existence and properties of the ocean, though no eye can discover its bounds or fathom its depths. The pride of reason will be lost in the self-abasing feelings of Christian humility; for he who while he cultivates his understanding, has laid his mind open to the impressions of genuine religion, will never pride himself on the perfection of his capacity or the variety of his attainments. As he advances in the path of knowledge, he will perceive the horizon, which is only stationary to those who stand still, perpetually retiring from him, till it is lost in "the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God." That there should be difficulties in the study of natural and revealed religion will not

appear extraordinary to him who is thus duly impressed with the limited extent of his own faculties, the wisdom of God, and the small portion of Divine government which has been placed within his view; nor will he hastily renounce a religion, the authority of whose evidences his reason has once admitted, because it may contain some doctrines which he cannot perfectly explain. Thankful for that divine assistance which it hath pleased the Almighty to afford him, he will be only anxious to direct his course by that compass which points steadily to heaven, however he may be unable to explain in what manner the secret influence is conveyed which gives it that direction, or account for all its variations.

Such is the natural effect arising from the union of sound learning with religious education. Let us pray, then, that their combination may continue to be the distinguishing characteristic of our Church in general, and of this institution in particular, without fearing that we are thereby impairing our chance of proficiency in that better knowledge, which, though revealed originally to babes, we have no reason to believe will not now be extended, in at least an equal degree, to the wise and prudent.

THE END.